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A PLAGUE OF OFFICE-SEEKING.

BY GENERAL CHARLES H. T. COLLIS.

“FLESH and blood cannot long stand the strain to which we subject our President and Cabinet every four years.”

This was the concluding paragraph of a letter I received a month ago from the most distinguished American now living, and was intended to express his contempt for the growing and unseemly demand made upon the time, the patience, and the health of the Executive by the personal appeals of the office-seekers and their influential friends.

Those who have visited the White House since the 4th of March must have been pained, if not humiliated, at the spectacle of all kinds of people from all sorts of places dinging into the Chief Magistrate’s ears the merits, and sometimes the demerits, of candidates, sincerely laboring under the impression that the dispensing of patronage is the chief, if not the only, function of his office, and going away with as little appreciation of the courtesy received as though they had paid a dollar at an intelligence office and “left their characters behind them.”

A little while ago I stood in the President’s room with forty or fifty others similarly privileged, while at least twice as many more were waiting for a chance at him in an adjoining room. Mr. Blaine was anxious to present Mr. Whitelaw Reid, who desired to bid the President farewell, previous to his departure for Paris ; Senator Hawley was looking for a chance to introduce a distinguished Englishman ; General N. P. Banks wanted simply to pay his respects ; Henry Cabot Lodge was restlessly pacing the room looking at his watch, and a distinguished Senator from the Pacific slope told me he wanted to speak to the President about the discrimination of the inter-State bill in favor of foreign corporations ; yet during the time these gentlemen were waiting,

a delegation of citizens were recommending their candidate, who was present, for the postmastership of a town which had, perhaps, barely risen to the dignity of a place in the gazetteer.

I heard the President say, apparently in self-defence and as though courteously to end the conference, "Really this is a matter for the Postmaster General," to which came the ready and premeditated response :

"We have seen Mr. Wanamaker, and we are sure he will make the appointment if you ask him to."

This is, I presume, a fair sample of what happens every day. I confess I had a little axe with me, myself; but after what I saw I had not the temerity to submit it to very severe friction, and brought it home with me with its edge about as dull as when I took it there.

Across the street to the State Department, and I ran into a similar collection: little knots of delegations dadoed the four walls of the Secretary's room. Mr. Blaine, who had just returned from the White House, asked me to be seated, as he desired to speak to me when at leisure, and then started on a tour around the room, listening in turn to each group, occasionally making a memorandum at his desk, once or twice signing papers brought to him by his clerk, answering some visitors "according to their folly," and some "*not* according to their folly," until he had sent every one away happy, some of them, doubtless, to the nearest telegraph office to announce to their friends at home that they had "a sure thing."

It must be an immense relief to these gentlemen that there is a droll side to their busy lives. Here were a couple of ladies who were, perhaps, a part of the household of some recently-appointed consul, or perhaps they were applicants for European passports, who talked in such holy horror of the ocean that I at once located them in the far interior. At all events, they insisted upon having the Secretary's views upon seasickness, and as to which was the safest line of steamers. How I envied him the possession of that excruciating urbanity which led him to advise them "to take a very large ship, because the larger the ship was the more water she would draw, and therefore the less motion of the vessel"; and when he found his terms too technical (for, of course, they didn't know a pump from a keel), it was lovely to hear him explain what he meant by the "amount of water she would draw."

General Tracy's hours for receiving had expired when I called ; nevertheless he kindly insisted upon my coming in, and I found him discussing both his lunch and a contract at the same time. After disposing of his two engineers and the greater part of his meal, we had a brief chat, during which he confessed that, owing to the demands upon his time from those who desired his assistance, this was the first opportunity he had had either to eat or to transact business ; yet he looks like a man used to hard work at all kinds of hours, and thoroughly resigned to submit to the custom in vogue without complaint.

The next morning I dropped in to Mr. Secretary Windom's room. That *was* a sight ! Perhaps some of you know that it is one of the largest apartments in the Treasury building. Well, it was not only full, but it had a "surplus" ; and all these were candidates and their friends. Are there really custom-houses enough to go 'round ? The Secretary stood at his table at the far end of the room, one foot resting upon his chair,—already, perhaps, fatigued, for it was now noon,—receiving each individual and party in turn, and occasionally making a note of what they had to recommend. The tide was still at the flood when I left the room, and I went away wondering where and at what hour of the day or night he attended to the momentous affairs of his department, or whether he was compelled to entrust them to subordinates, while he performed the higher duty of receiving the American people.

Now, Mr. Postmaster-General Wanamaker, whether by accident or design, has his desk in a very *small* room. It holds comfortably about six. If a seventh man came in, I should consider him rude ; yet the exigencies of the public service are such, and the demand for new talent in the department is considered so urgent by those who "gave all their time and money for the Republican party," that there were five or six rude people present, besides myself. A Senator from New York, ever on the alert to take care of those who "have done the State some service," had Mr. Wanamaker all to himself at the front window, and his smile of satisfaction as he departed brought a pang of envy to many a throbbing heart whose ordeal was yet to come.

Mr. Wanamaker, I imagine, suffers less physical fatigue, and permits his department to suffer less, through the exactions of the public than any other member of the Cabinet. He is a young

man and his habits of life enable him to get through with a great deal of routine matter before the pressure arrives; besides which he has a quick, yet cordial, method of getting rid of one, to make room for another. *His* "flesh and blood" will not be likely to succumb to the "strain" complained of by my illustrious correspondent.

The fact is that at least three-fourths of the President's and the Cabinet's time is occupied in listening to appeals for office; add to this the hours they would consume if they read one-tenth of the letters and petitions upon the same subject, and what is there left for the proper performance of the duties incident to their respective offices? The President of the United States is, perhaps, the only man in the world who has absolutely no privacy; even his garden in the rear of his residence is a public park open to everybody; he is not secure against the place-hunter in the public street; and I know personally that he and his predecessors have been importuned for favors while trying to enjoy a little rest at the homes of their friends. Is all this the fault of our institutions, our democratic notions, our bad manners? Or is it brought about by a too liberal disposition upon the part of the Executive to be considered of and from and one of the people at all times? Perhaps all these causes contribute. But it is an evil—an admitted, growing evil. The President himself would not deny it; no truthful citizen of either party would gainsay it.

Very true, this is an extraordinary epoch in our political history. When the Democratic party went out in 1861 and Mr. Lincoln came in, the patriotic impulse to enlist, and the opportunities afforded to obtain commissions in the army and navy, relieved him of a multitude of those vultors to whom belonged the spoils; and for a quarter of a century Mr. Lincoln's successors, finding the offices already filled by Republicans, had comparatively an easy time of it; but General Harrison succeeds a Democratic Administration with twice as many offices as existed under Mr. Buchanan, with a party at his back clamorous for the places now filled by the opposition, and with no outlet such as helped Mr. Lincoln out of his dilemma.

Yet there must be some remedy for all this. Is the President simply to grin and bear this daily, monotonous, wearing-out process, which I venture to say makes little or no impression upon him touching the office in question, and in nineteen cases out of

twenty is of no possible service to the candidate himself? Is not the President at fault in tolerating so liberally the custom of personal importunity, in this—that he is perpetuating a system which will make the lives of his successors a greater burden to them than his life is to him? A President is apt to believe that the whole country holds him responsible for a faulty appointment. I do not believe it. Partisan journals may talk so, but their ravings are at best ephemeral; the thinking American people know better. Admitting, however, that this is so, who are more to blame for the attaching of this responsibility than the Presidents themselves, who administer the executive office in this respect as it is administered nowhere else on the planet, and as it would be ruinous to administer it in any great corporation?

Imagine Beaconsfield, or Salisbury, or Gladstone compelled to stand at a desk in Downing Street and listen to the appeals of rival factions from Newcastle-upon-Tyne touching the appointment of an inspector of coal mines! Imagine Mr. Roberts, or Mr. Depew, or Mr. Pullman fixing four hours every day during which he would receive applicants for employment and their friends! What a relief this would be to the general manager or superintendent, who, when “a good man went wrong,” could boast, “I don’t know the fellow; he was appointed by the president of the company.” It would be otherwise, however, if the head of the bureau had been clothed with the appointing power, for then the president could say to him, “Unless this man’s endorsement *assured* his fitness, he should not have been appointed”; and one such admonition would have secured the future against a recurrence.

The sympathy of the people can always be relied upon by a President who cares for his own comfort so that he may the better equip himself to care for theirs; and as but a small percentage of them are candidates for office, the larger body will, one of these days, *demand* that all his precious time, and perhaps his life, shall not be given to the few. The desire to avoid mistakes, which in the Presidential office is an uppermost thought, as it ought to be in all official relations of life, is apt to create an oppressive burden, the very weight of which may make him stumble, and the pain and embarrassment of this misstep may cripple him irreparably. These tumbles, unfortunately, illustrate the lives of too many of our Presidents. Their blunders are remembered,

while the great things they did for the advancement of the Nation find no place in history outside the musty archives of the State Department.

There is no reason in the world, for instance, why the President of the United States should go bail for a postmaster. The people do not demand it; his constitutional obligations do not require it; his oath of office covers no statutory mandate that he should select the public functionaries himself: on the contrary, "by and with the advice and consent of the Senate" gives him a crucible in which all appointments suggested by his Cabinet may be tested, and experience proves that this process generally separates the dross from the pure metal.

Let the President announce that the custom of personal application to the Executive, excepting at the suggestion of the head of the department having jurisdiction of the subject, will be considered "more honored in the breach than the observance," and he will not only have taken a long stride in the right direction, but the people will applaud him. Cabinet officers can then say: "When this subject comes up, I will lay your testimonials before the President, but you will do your cause an injury if you see him in advance." Senators and Congressmen can say to their constituents: "I shall be notified when this place is to be filled, and will be on hand to ask your appointment; but don't go near the President or Secretary in the meantime, unless you want to put your cause in jeopardy."

The notion that the American people claim the right to be brought in contact with the President whenever they so desire, and that it is his duty to receive them, is a mistake. Their education has been in that direction, it is true, but they have an inherent love of fair play, and they believe the President to be as much entitled to rest, comfort, and privacy as any other man. They would feel happier if he and his constitutional advisers would formulate some plan which would enable them so to relieve themselves of this pernicious pressure as to devote more time to the public weal. They will ratify any remedy initiated by those who alone can suggest it. Who will bring it about? Will it be the President himself, or will his political family insist upon his being relieved? *Nous verrons.*

Let it not be forgotten that the President of the United States is the only head of a nation who could not relieve himself of the

burdens of office. A king can abdicate;—a President cannot even resign, for there is no constitutional body to which he could tender his resignation. He is bound to stick!

To-day the President, if he had fun enough left in him after his weary day's labor, might liken himself to a graphophone out of repair. He is talked to, and talked to, and talked to, all day long; but the next morning, if he turned the crank, he wouldn't understand a consecutive sentence of the confused babble. Therefore I say, "*Cui bono?*"

Let not these words of my friend General Sherman become prophetic: "Flesh and blood cannot long stand the strain to which we subject our President and Cabinet every four years"!

CHARLES H. T. COLLIS.